

## SOME NOTES ON THE PROBLEMS OF PRIVATE ARCHIVES

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By the Archives Act of 1957 the National Archives of New Zealand is charged with "the custody, care, control and administration of all public archives deposited in the National Archives". The emphasis of National Archives activity is therefore on the public (official) archives of the country not private archives. The Act does however leave the way clear for deposit of private archives in National Archives. In practice, we have confined ourselves to archives closely related to the public field, such as papers of Ministers of the Crown and permanent heads of government departments, and the quantity we have is relatively small. Other material is directed to other institutions involved with private archives.

Our experience of private archives is thus limited but it has been sufficient to show that private archives present problems, at least some of which are not to be found with public archives. To start with, one has more control over public servants—you cannot enforce deposit of private archives and are therefore in some measure beholden to the donor who can quite justifiably act in an independent fashion, requiring conditions of access for example which can make the archivists' task more difficult.

What other factors are there? Firstly, the material is likely to have a strong personal content liable to arouse individual sensitivity in the short term.

Secondly, generally speaking I would anticipate a great extent of disorganisation and therefore a more complex job of arrangement and description.

A lesson I have drawn from this is to carefully consider possible consequences before accepting conditions. They can prevent the archivist from fully carrying out his work. I would certainly hesitate to allow premature access to achievees and would want to have adequate facilities to cope with any major accession.

Our major source of "private" archives are the papers of a former Prime Minister, the late Sir Walter Nash. Sir Walter's papers are a rare source of information over many years—as his career extended over many years (he died aged 86) and he was an inveterate hoarder.

The papers present an excellent example of the problems. The bulk, some 700 linear feet, and disorganisation is formidable. About the owners of some of the papers there has been some doubt; others were sensitive. Worse still we accepted the papers, as was to be expected, under special terms. The special terms included the right of a prominent New Zealand historian and his research assistants to start work on a biography immediately. Under such conditions it was virtually impossible to properly

organise the archives and to isolate the odd sensitive paper. Yet at the same time we had undertaken to act responsibly and consider individuals, government and political parties. The papers concerned too many parties who needed to be consulted. Premature access has certainly not helped the control of the papers—I foresee problems of citation and there is an extra risk that such order as there was has been disturbed. We have still to complete final processing of the archives so that the weight of archival problems cannot be fully realised. In the meantime the biographer has completed his work and we have ruled there can be no further access to the archives until they have been completely organised. Scholars grow restive, especially in view of the fact that, as mentioned above, access has already been given. We have much tidying to do repairs to some documents will be necessary; others require special storage and more detailed finding aids than we normally find necessary will be required. Because of the bulk and disorganised state in which the papers were received this will be a complex task.

On the credit side—these private archives have been preserved and a biography of merit produced while contemporary interest is at its height. This is the difficult choice so often presented by private archives.